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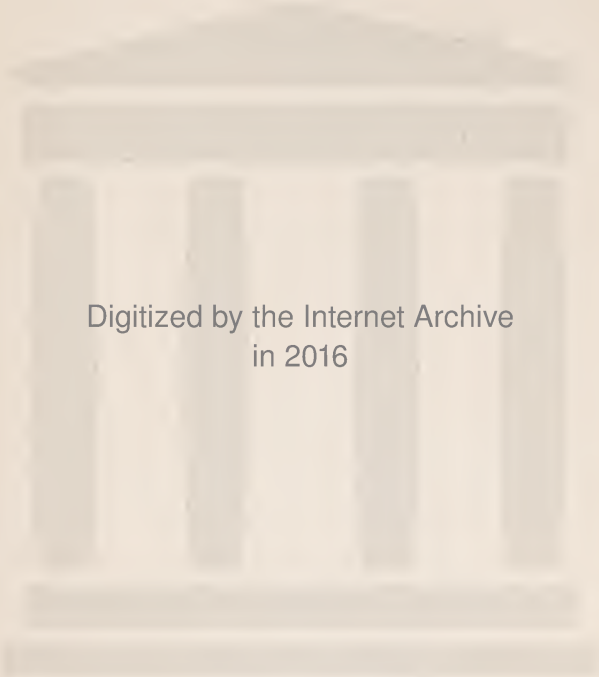
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*An
Old New England
Meeting House*



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AN
OLD NEW ENGLAND
MEETING HOUSE

A SERMON

PREACHED ON THE ONE HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY OF
THE DEDICATION OF THE MEETING HOUSE
OF THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH IN THE CITY OF
PROVIDENCE

BY
THE MINISTER
AUGUSTUS MENDON LORD, D.D.

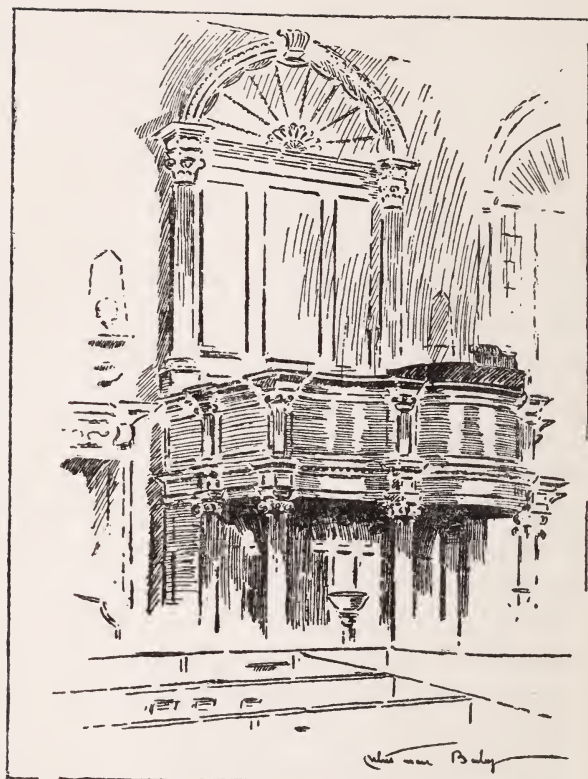
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AN
OLD NEW ENGLAND
MEETING HOUSE



"Our holy and our beautiful house."

Isaiah lxiv, 11.

OUR anniversary is the anniversary of a building, and I want to dwell chiefly on what this building has meant to successive generations of the fellowship that has gathered here, and to the growing city in which it has come to be a familiar landmark.

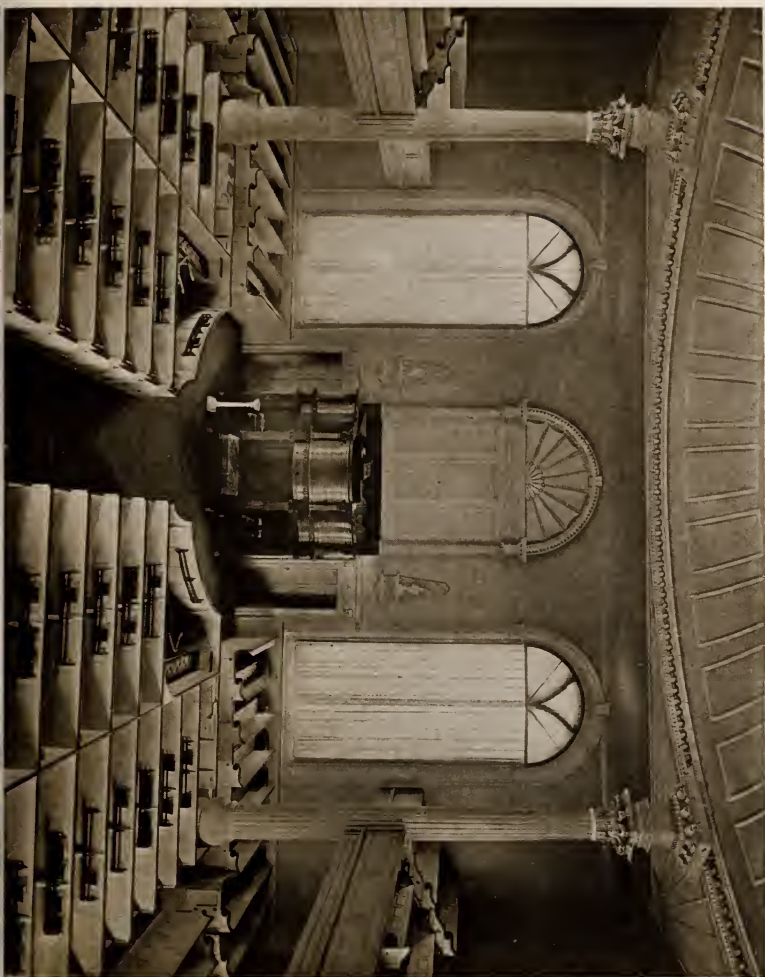
The place of the building as an expression of the religious life and faith of men has differed with differing peoples and phases of thought, and changed with advancing civilization.

The Greek thought of his temple as a dwelling erected for the occasional occupancy of a divine being, where at stated seasons, on holy days, the divinity might be approached and importuned by the worshipper. The temple was made as rich and splendid, as beautiful and awe-inspiring, as possible; but it was in no sense homelike to the ordinary man and

woman. They had no part in its administration. It did not belong to them—it was an official institution. One did not linger there any more than one would linger in the palace of a king, or the state-house of a governor; but having performed the prescribed rites and ceremonies, and paid the necessary tributes and vows, went away with a sense of relief to the real homelike world of city streets and country fields, and the faces and voices of one's fellows that waited without.

And something of the same sort was true of one type of church—not the earliest church of the Roman Empire, the church that was largely gathered in the homes of the people—but of the mediæval church, of which the Gothic cathedrals in France and England are splendid representatives. Read John Ruskin's classic description of an English Cathedral Close in his *Seven Lamps of Architecture*.

You notice it is a "Close"—a place set apart by those who dwell there for the



living of a kind of life different from that of ordinary men and women, shut out from pressing necessities and clashing interests—different from the ordinary lot and aspect of experience, as the soaring arches, the softened light falling from windows of gorgeous color, within its doors; and without, the great walls of buttressed stone rising to massive towers and airy pinnacles; its cool and quiet cloisters set about green lawns, were different from the rooms and roads and neighborhoods, the city streets and the country fields, which were the daily home surroundings of those who now and then gathered in these great churches for rest and prayer.

And no doubt the need for rest and prayer must find expression in every phase of true religion; and the religious building must always be something of a temple—a place set apart, different—a place of withdrawal and uplift—where something of what we see, as well as what we hear, shall suggest the presence of a life above our own, to which we shall lift

up our hearts, as the tired eyes of the traveler sometimes lift from the road to the blue of the distant hills.

But there have been those who have thought that while no expression of the religious life, either to the eye or the ear or the spirit of man, would be complete that should lack the elements of grandeur and awe and unfamiliar beauty, still, the main emphasis of any attempt to express and fulfil the religious life, whether in the mood of the heart, the thought of the mind, the word of prophet and preacher, the art of painter or musician or architect, should not rest there. The main emphasis of the religious life should lie in a sense of intimate comradeship between each soul and God, and among all souls as sharing in that comradeship, and the building which sought to give expression to that sense of comradeship should be above all else homelike—a meeting house of those kindred in spirit—children of a common father—not a place where we may get away by ourselves, but where we may get together with many others,

and through the sense of a common human life, come to the sense of the divine life which needs every soul and all souls together to express itself, to fulfil itself, and sends us back to where we thought we were working alone, thinking alone, struggling alone, with this sustaining sense of comradeship, this assurance that many are working to the same end, struggling with the same problems, sympathizing with our failure, rejoicing in our success, and that working in all, and through all, as well as above all, is the great Comrade, the loving Father of the one house of many mansions.

It was men who had this conception of religion that built the first meeting houses of New England—the First Congregational Churches of our towns and cities.

They aimed to make them like the best of their homes, not without a touch of dignity and beauty, but dignity and beauty that should not be entirely foreign to their daily way of thought and manner of life. It used to be said that the Puritan meeting house was bare and

dreary and utterly forbidding. But we must remember that at first the homes of these people were simple and not richly adorned; and, moreover, the last generation has discovered that in many of the churches, as well as in many of the houses, of that period, homes and churches built by native craftsmen, there is a beauty of restrained decoration, a dignity of proportion, an accuracy of line, which puts to shame the riot of color and the confusion of overloaded detail of an intervening period in the passing delusions of which some of us shared.

Even of the oldest preserved specimens of New England meeting houses, built in the first half of the eighteenth century, or even earlier, this satisfying beauty of proportion and outline is noticeable.

Later, in the last quarter of the eighteenth and the first quarter of the nineteenth century—the Georgian period—as Americans accumulated property and enjoyed more leisure, they began to elaborate and enrich the decoration of their homes, and of their churches and other

public buildings, statehouses, courthouses and the like, still in admirable taste, and with remarkable restraint. In response to this demand for a certain consistent style in exterior and interior decoration, there grew up in New England a noteworthy group of what might be termed carpenter-architects, or architect-builders, of whom the best known is Charles Bulfinch of Boston. In this same class were Benjamin Asher; Peter Banner, builder of Park Street Church, Boston; Joseph Brown, builder of the First Baptist Church, Providence; Andrew Hamilton, builder of Independence Hall, Philadelphia; Peter Harrison, builder of the Redwood Library, Newport; John Smibert, builder of Faneuil Hall, Boston; Samuel McIntire, builder of the South Church, Salem; and John H. Greene, the architect of this church. All of these men were primarily builders of houses, of homes; and, as I have already suggested, they were thus admirably equipped to make their public buildings, and particularly their churches, homelike, in accordance

with the intimately human faith of those who gathered in these churches.

It is interesting to note that this group of architect-builders read and studied the illustrated treatises of a number of contemporary foreign, especially English, architects who, themselves, were mainly interested in domestic, or at any rate, secular, architecture, although some of them, as Gibbs and Inigo Jones, built splendid churches.

In William Roach Ware's book on *The Georgian Period*, is given a list of some English books known to have been possessed and used by many of these American builders. This list includes:

Works in Architecture, by R. and S. Adam.

Rules for Drawing the Several Parts of Architecture, by James Gibbs.

Designs Consisting of Plans and Elevations for Public and Private Buildings, by Inigo Jones.

Sketches in Architecture, by Sir J. Sloan.

The British Architect, or Builders' Treasury of Staircases, Etc., by A. Swan.

Most of these American builders lived not far from each other, probably knew each other and met occasionally, adopted suggestions from each other, developed a style common to all of them in its general features, and even invaded each other's territory. Sometimes they went farther afield. The Independent Presbyterian Church in Savannah, for instance, was built by John H. Greene three years later than this church, of which it is a very close copy—spire, windows, interior dome and pulpit. When the present Savannah church was erected as far as possible on the lines of the original, which was burned to the ground in 1890, certain measurements were taken from this church for the guidance of those in charge of the restoration.

John H. Greene was the designer and builder of many of the fine old houses of Providence, such as the Sullivan Dorr house, 109 Benefit Street, the Beckwith house, corner Benefit and College Streets, and the house now owned by Mrs. John Carter Brown on Benevolent Street, op-

posite our Parish House. He also designed and built St. John's Church, Dexter Asylum, and the first meeting house of the Universalists. But he regarded this church as his masterpiece, and was proud of its every detail, as appears in his own account of the building preserved in our parish records.

The exterior of the church today, now that the original white glass, small-paned windows have been happily restored, is practically the same as it was in 1816, with the difference of a few feet in the height of the steeple, the top of which was blown off in the great gale of 1836. John Greene, although conforming generally to the prevalent style of Georgian architecture in his buildings, was something of a genius, and here and there added touches of daring, but, in the opinion of some of the best judges, successful, originality. This appears in the row of large single windows of our church instead of the double row of smaller windows which characterizes other New England churches; and the outstanding



circles of columns on the spire, of which there are only one or two other instances in the country.

Aymar Embury II, in his book on *Early American Churches*, speaking of the spire of the Independent Presbyterian Church of Savannah which, as I have said, is an exact copy of our spire, says, "it is one of the best designed of all the old church spires, both in the method of transition from the square to the octagonal, and in the proportion of each story." Mr. Embury, who is a New Yorker, apparently does not know that he could have found the original of this spire much nearer home.

The bell which hangs in the spire was cast by Paul Revere and Son at Canton, Mass., and according to a published list of their bells, appears to be the largest and heaviest ever manufactured by them. The weight engraved on the bell is 2,488 pounds. It was hung in place on August 16, 1816.

I have said that the outward appearance of the church, with the exception

of a little difference in the height of the spire, is practically what it was in 1816. Perhaps I should have made one more qualification. The appearance of the grounds is not just the same. In 1816, and, I believe, until after 1860, around the lawn in front of the church was a fence of the fine Colonial style which you sometimes see around old gardens in such towns as Salem and Portsmouth and Newburyport. There were three gates in this fence with high posts surmounted by ornamental urns, corresponding to the urns on the spire.

There was no fence at the back of the church. The original intention, when the first church was built on this spot, was to have it entirely surrounded by a fence. The reason why this intention was abandoned, as given in a letter of Mr. Jabez Bowen's, affords a glimpse of the leisurely days when people drove to church from far and near, and there was need of sheds and hitching posts.

This letter was written "to the Committee for erecting a Fence round the

Meeting House" and reads, in part, as follows:

"GENTLEMEN: I am informed that 'tis in contemplation to shut out all carriages from coming into the Meeting House yard to land their passengers, &c. This will be a most serious disappointment to many Females, especially on Stormy Days. In good weather few Ladies would go into the yard but would land at the front gate of choice. I think it should be so planned as for a Carriage to enter the yard from Benevolent Street, pass the door, go round the House, and come into the street east of the Meeting House. . . . Not being able to attend [your Committee] in person, I have thought it proper to give you my opinion in writing. And Remain

Yours, &c,

JABEZ BOWEN."

The appearance of the interior of the church, as well as of the exterior, is much the same as it was in 1816. The most marked difference, of course, is in the two memorial windows on each side of the organ, which do not show from the outside.

The coloring of the walls has been changed, too, and the green blinds re-

placed by soft green draperies. Originally the walls were white, and soon became soiled and dingy. The present blending shades of quiet gray are equally characteristic of the Colonial and Georgian period, and at the same time bring out no less satisfactorily the exquisite details of carving and relief work in the dome, about the capitals of the columns, over the doors, and back of the pulpit. All these details, I am told by those who speak with authority, are in the Adam style of decoration, so that this interior is distinctly and consistently an Adam interior—one of the finest examples of that type of decoration to be found in the United States.

You will remember that among the books used by American builders of the Georgian period was *Works in Architecture*, by R. and S. Adam. A copy of this book is in the Providence Public Library, and if you look over its numerous illustrations, you will see how many suggestions from it were used by Mr. Greene in the decoration of this church.

In as far as Greene belonged to any English School of Architecture, it was to the Adam School. Another New England architect of the same school was Samuel McIntire of Salem.

Adam, you remember, designed furniture as well as buildings, and I have often wondered whether the two chairs under the pulpit were copied from his originals. There is a delicious touch of the unconscious blending of paganism with Christianity, characteristic of Adam's love for the Italian Renaissance, in the carving on these chairs of Hymen's torch and Cupid's bow.

The commanding feature in this church, as in all Congregational churches of the same period throughout New England, is the pulpit. It is a noble piece of architecture in itself. Originally it stood on a platform raised over two feet above the church floor and mounted by two steps. The removal of this platform and the consequent lowering of the pulpit in 1837 was deeply resented by Mr. Greene.

He had planned to build the pulpit of

pine and paint it white. But a group of the young men of the congregation raised over four hundred dollars and enabled him to carry out his design in mahogany.

There are at least two other pulpits in New England churches very similar in design to this: one in the Unitarian church in Mendon, Mass.; and one in the Unitarian church in Lancaster, Mass., designed by Bulfinch. Both of these are of soft wood, painted white. I have tried to trace back the lineage of this particular balcony-like pulpit to its English or Continental origins. As far as I know you will find nothing like it in any English or Continental church interior. But the suggestion has been made to me (and I think it well worth consideration), that you will find its prototype in the pulpits that were built on the outside walls or pillars of some of these churches of the Old World, and were entered through a window from the inside. These were distinctly balconies, and in some instances were supported by pillars resting on the ground. Such pulpits were used

occasionally to address crowds of people gathered in the church yard, or on the neighboring street.

Turning to the other end of our church, the beautiful case of the organ, in harmony with the general architecture of the building, was, of course, designed by John H. Greene, and although the organ has been enlarged, the case remains practically the same.

According to the records, when the second church building of this Society was destroyed by fire in 1814, most of the pipes of the organ were rescued practically uninjured. This organ, built for the church in 1794 by Mr. Geib, a celebrated German organ maker, is reputed by a local tradition, for the accuracy of which I will not vouch, to be the first organ used by any Congregational society in America.

The following subscription paper, circulated at the time the organ was erected in 1794, implies that the motives for attending church in those days were mixed:

"We, the subscribers, believing it to be the wish of everyone who frequents public worship (whether influenced by Piety, Ostentation, or Pleasure), that the 'Concord of Sweet Sounds' make a part of their Devotional Exercises—Do agree to have an Elegant Organ in order that the insufficiency of Singing alone may be obviated, and that the music, necessary on the Lord's Day may be no longer dependent on Caprice."

Some of this organ very possibly we are still using. For a Boston builder, Goodrich, contracted to rebuild it and place it in the new church, with the guarantee that it should be of the same plan and equal to the organ in the Brattle Street Church, Boston.

When the organ was cleaned a year ago, I noticed very early dates on the pipes, and one or two pipes were as thin as paper owing to long service. I am not sure that in the interior of an organ antiquity is altogether to be desired.

And, by the way, it is significant that in the eighteenth, and in the early part of the nineteenth century, at any rate,

Congregationalists apparently looked to Boston for their highest standard. The second building of this society, for instance, erected in 1794, was a copy of the Hollis Street Church in Boston; and in 1775-76, during the siege of Boston, when that city was occupied by the British troops, we engaged as our minister the minister of the Second Church of Boston, Rev. Dr. John Lothrop.

As far as I can discover, in 1816, when the church was dedicated, the only part that could be adequately heated was the little room at the rear of the pulpit—the minister's room—where there was a fireplace. From this fireplace, however, just before the hour of service hot embers were taken and distributed among the foot warmers which were brought there and afterward placed in the various pews. Some families filled their own foot warmers with embers from the hearth at home and brought them to church.

A year ago last summer, when the church was undergoing restoration and repair, the workmen found in a closet

under the vestibule stairs a dozen or two of these foot warmers, some of them having the initials of the owner or the number of the pew carved on the wooden frame.

At that time, whenever an evening service was held, the church was lighted by candles. And even after candles were superseded by oil lamps elsewhere, the candles apparently were retained in the chandelier which hung from the centre of the dome; for one of the oldest members of the church tells me that she remembers this chandelier, and remembers that it was removed because those who sat beneath it complained of the dripping of the wax.

Barring the heating and the lighting, then, our church would seem very like home to any of that vanished generation who helped to build it, if they could return and share this service with us. I imagine that the architect-builder, John H. Greene, if he were sitting this morning in his own chosen pew, donated to him by his proud and grateful fellow-parishioners (No. 75), at the left of the pulpit,

chosen, no doubt, because from that point of view he could see at a glance the length and breadth and height of the building, every detail of which he had wrought out with loving care—if John H. Greene were here in his accustomed place, I imagine he would join with us in gratitude to the loyal and generous donors, and to the skilful architect and decorator who, in 1915, appreciated the beauty of Greene's original plan, restored the church to its pristine dignity of line and delicacy of detail, and emphasized its beauty and its dignity in ways that were unattainable a century ago.

So, then, the church that stands here in 1916 is the church that stood here in 1816. But what of the world which the church seeks to serve; what of the spirit of the modern world, its problems and burdens, its hopes and its fears?

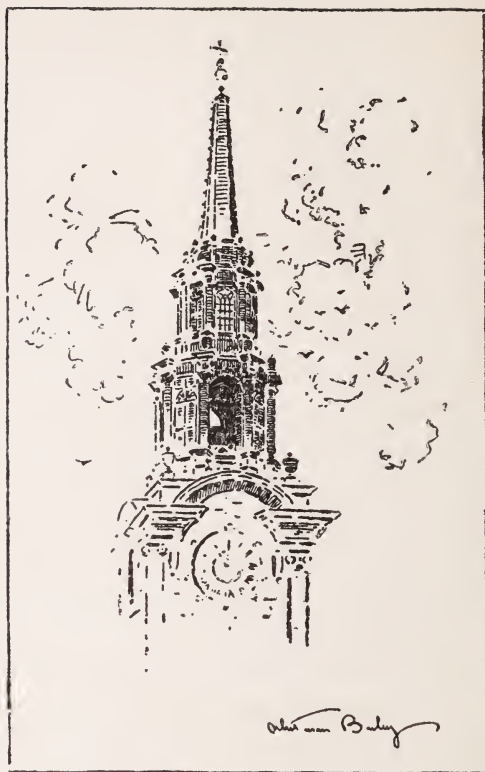
When I was looking up the story of the building of this church, in anticipation of our centenary, the first sources of information to which I turned were the Providence newspapers of October

and November, 1816. I found almost nothing about the church dedication, or indeed, about anything of local interest except in the advertisements. Providence was so small a place in those days that everybody knew all about his neighbor's business by word of mouth. Local news did not need to be printed. The *Providence Gazette* notes casually that at the dedication on October 31, 1816, "notwithstanding the day was wet and unpleasant, a very numerous audience attended."

It is only fair to state, however, that then, as now, the whole world, including America, was absorbed in the remaking of the map of Europe consequent on a great war. A few months before the laying of the corner-stone of the church in 1815, the Battle of Waterloo had been fought. There the flame of a devouring imperialism flickered and fell and faded away. The embers of hate and strife smouldered long; but slowly over the torn and scarred fields Nature resumed her sway; little by little, year by year,

the grass and the corn and the grain, the orchards and the vineyards covered and obliterated the traces of cruel and wasteful strife. Little by little, year by year, ~~to~~ the bruised and saddened and shamed hearts of men, the natural impulses of generous sympathy and fellow-service, returned and overcame and overgrew the unnatural lusts of envy and anger and vengeance and hate and fear.

As was the year of the dedication of this building to the worship of God and the service of man, so may this hundredth year of its existence be the dawning of a new era for a world once more ravaged by war and embittered by hate. And in the bringing in of that new day may the gospel of hope and faith and love, in the light of which the fellowship of this church has been maintained and cherished, the gospel of a free church in a free state, play a part even more splendid and glorious for the generations of the century to come than it has played for the generations of the century that has just passed away.



REPORT ON THE RESTORATION
IN 1915
OF THE INTERIOR OF THE
FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,
PROVIDENCE, R. I.

BY
MR. HENRY BACON
NEW YORK



THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH is an excellent example of the architecture of the late eighteenth century, showing the influence of the best architects who had practiced prior to and during that period. The design of both the exterior and interior is very similar to that of the Independent Presbyterian Church in Savannah, Ga., which was built about the same time, and judging by information and records it seems indisputable that John H. Greene, architect, was responsible for the design of both churches. The interiors of these two churches are almost identical in design, though a restoration of the Independent Presbyterian Church has resulted in an inferior treatment of the panes of the windows, which was not in use during the period when they were originally built.

The windows of the First Congregational Church were originally muntin windows, i. e., with small panes with wood divisions, but at some later period painted and stained pseudo-Gothic leaded glass had been substituted, which injured the general aspect of the interior. Two stained-glass memorial windows of rather brilliant color, conspicuously and unsymmetrically placed, still further injured the original quiet appearance of the building.

While some of the large surfaces were painted in good tones, a great many of them, such as, for instance, the gallery panels, were painted in

stencil work suggesting Victorian-Gothic, one of the worst styles that ever existed, and, of course, out of character with the original design.

The problem of restoring the church was quite simple, all of the windows being fitted with new sash designed in accordance with the best traditions of the old period, and these sashes are glazed with a Belgian glass resembling the product of early glass workers, having various tints of a light color, though the general effect is a monotone. The two stained-glass memorial windows were removed from the side of the church and placed symmetrically in the windows at each side of the entrance, where they were least disturbing to the interior. The original windows probably had folding wood blinds with slat panels like those existing in the Savannah Church, but it was thought inadvisable to replace these, as they are difficult to adjust. Curtains of a neutral shade of gray-green were placed at the sides and tops of the windows to exclude an excess of sunlight.

The pew cushion covers and carpeting on the floors were made to order, and are a neutral green of a darker shade than the curtains. Many trials of color were made during the course of the work, and when the color treatment was established, the fabrics were especially woven to conform to the scheme.

The beautiful old mahogany pulpit and

mouldings of the same wood crowning the pews were in splendid condition and were only re-touched where they had been damaged by long use.

One of the best makes of vacuum cleaners has been installed in the basement, and new lighting fixtures have also been installed. While these last are used at present solely for gas, they have been so constructed that they can be wired for electricity at any time.

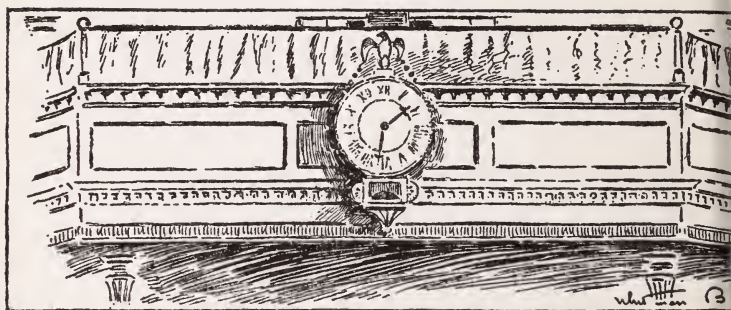
The painting of the interior has been done with subtle shades of gray. The structural features, such as doors, window frames, gallery fronts, pews, and the relief ornamentation of the ceiling, are of light grays, and the other surfaces of the walls and ceiling are of darker grays, produced by applying successive coats of different tones. All this work is relieved by the use of clear gray-blue in the background of the ornamental plaster courses, and the use of some gold leaf on the cornices, ornaments, and other projections.

It was the aim of those in charge of these alterations to restore as nearly as possible the original simplicity of this fine interior, and its splendid proportions have been emphasized by the means employed.

Respectfully submitted,

HENRY BACON.

March 20, 1916.



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